

"The Traitor" by Bellocchio: Those Good Italian Boys

Monica Straniero (May 29, 2019)



"The Traitor," which was sold to over 24 countries, including the United States, is a story of crime and treason about a man who was able to leave the mafia but lived the rest of his life in exile, paranoid because the mafia never forgets.

On the eve of his departure towards a secret location, Italian mafia boss Tommaso Buscetta, played by Pierfrancesco Favino, asks his old friend and fellow mafioso Giuseppe "Pippo" Calò (Fabrizio Ferracane) to take care of his children. He leaves for Brazil with the intention to start a new life with his new wife Cristina. (Maria Fernanda Cândido)

This is how Marco Bellocchio's "The Traitor" begins: an intimate drama about the most famous "pentito" in the history of the Italian mafia, a contestant in the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. In Brazil, the peace is broken by the death reports arriving from Italy.



The war between bosses tied to the Palermitan gangs and the Corleones, lead by Totò Riina, are leaving behind a trail of blood. Amongst the victims, Buscetta’s children as well as many of his ex-companions.

Extradited to Italy, Don Masino decides to collaborate with Judge Falcone (Fausto Russo Alesi) and releases a confession consisting of 487 pages filled with first and last names, abominable acts, and implications, enough to bring Cosa Nostra to its knees which, as Buscetta explains, is the real name of the organization because “The mafia doesn’t exist, it’s an invention of the press.”

The court scenes showing the “maxi processo” echo greek tragedies, with the mafiosi howling like caged animals, spitting all sorts of insults and vulgarities, while Nicola Piovani’s dramatic string instrument soundtrack gives a lyrical feeling to the stand-off between Buscetta and his former “colleagues.”

However, “The Traitor” owes most of its success to Favino’s performance. Known for his innumerable apparitions in secondary roles within Hollywood productions, such as “World War Z” and “The Catcher Was a Spy,” the Roman actor offers a charismatic and captivating interpretation of his character, bringing out his inner contradictions and ambiguities. Bellocchio fluctuates between two extreme poles.

If on the one-hand we see a soldier of the “old mafia,” a narcissistic womanizer who collaborates with the law because he has no other choice, on the other also emerges the figure of a father eaten up by guilt, seeking vengeance against those who killed his friends and family. This way, the public remains to a certain degree fascinated with Buscetta’s character.

It’s hard to draw the line that separates the man from the boss, a device that allows the director to leave open many questions regarding the real motives that pushed Buscetta to betray Cosa Nostra. While Favino holds an inscrutable expression, hiding his preoccupations behind the lines of his face, Totuccio Contorno, another famous “pentito” masterfully played by Luigi Lo Cascio, fervently replies to the provocations of the mafiosi locked up behind the court cells.

The film is however disappointing in its depiction of female characters. It seems that Bellocchio is trying to abide to the so-called honor code of the mafia, the most absolutely machist compendium promoted in the circles of Cosa Nostra. Women - sisters, wives, particularly Cristine - are seen mainly as sexual objects. As is shown by the seemingly pointless scene in which Cristina masturbates on the phone with a melancholic Buscetta. Perhaps Bellocchio is suggesting that this is the moment he decides to become an informer?

Even if Bellocchio romanticizes the ancient honor of Cosa Nostra and Buscetta along with it, “The Traitor,” which was sold to over 24 countries, including the United States, is a story of crime and treason about a man who was able to leave the mafia but lived the rest of his life in exile, paranoid because the mafia never forgets.

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